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SUBJECT: DRC REFUGEES IN LKOUALA- LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES AND
INSECURITY COMPLICATE RELIEF EFFORTS

REF: BRAZZAVILLE 39

1. (U) SUMMARY: The government of Congo-Brazzaville (GROC) estimates the total number of DRC citizens displaced to ROC now totals 115,077. Since mid-January, UNHCR has registered over 40,000 displaced persons and expects that the total number of registrations will be about 10% below the GROC's estimates. Humanitarian operations continue to be hampered by logistical problems and insecurity in the region. Currently the World Food Program's supplies in Impfondo have been exhausted, but the decision to begin airlifting food from Pointe Noire should ensure a more regular supply of food aid and bridge the gap until more commodities arrive. Improved security in the region, however, seems unlikely in the near future. Despite the launch of a new DRC military operation, militia activity continues along the Oubangui river and further inland in the DRC.

WFP WAREHOUSE EMPTY, AIRLIFT TO BEGIN THIS WEEK

2. (U) World Food Programme (WFP) Country Director Alix Loriston confirmed that the WFP warehouse in Impfondo, ROC is empty. However, in an effort to contextualize recent media reports, Loriston stressed that no new cases of malnutrition have been reported in the wake of this shortage. Although the need for food remains great, WFP does not expect the current break in the supply pipe line will adversely affect the displaced. To date, WFP has provided food to 52,000 people, or about half of the estimated 114,000 people in the region. There has been no re-distribution since the initial donation and there is no regular distribution in place. The displaced population remains largely self-sufficient. A few of the displaced still have supplies. The rest are making short trips to the DRC to harvest their crops, fishing, or foraging on the ROC side of the river. WFP donations have been targeted to meet immediate needs of specific populations, but not to provide long term support.

3. (U) As time progresses, however, the displaced population cannot remain self-sufficient. Crops are being harvested in the DRC, but no one is replanting. The price of food on the local market continues to rise as the displaced compete with the indigenous population for the little food available. Fish are plentiful in the Oubangui River, but the Prefet says that the fish stock traditionally declines in the dry season (March-July). Both the UN System and Doctors Without Borders-France (MSF) stress the need to start food distribution as soon as possible. Regular food distribution would improve health and help prevent the outbreak of epidemics. It would also limit the potential for conflict between ethnic groups and between the indigenous population and the displaced as local resources become ever scarcer.

4. (U) WFP has food shipments en route to Impfondo from Bangui and Brazzaville. WFP expected to receive these shipments this

week, but difficult road conditions between Bangui and Impfondo and continued insecurity on the Oubangui River have delayed their arrival. Even with these additional supplies, however, WFP forecasts continued breaks and shortfalls in the food supply pipeline due to the lack of regional stockpiles and the difficulty of moving supplies to the remote Likouala region on a timely basis. Because of the difficulty reaching Impfondo by land or water and the prospect for additional shortages while awaiting delivery food donations, WFP is now making plans for an airlift operation to Impfondo. According to Loriston, WFP plans to move nearly 600 tons from Pointe-Noire to Impfondo using a DRC based Antonov 12. Lorriston says the airlift operation will begin as soon as the GROC grants the required flight permissions.

REBEL ACTIVITY CONTINUES SOUTH OF IMPFONDO

15. (U) Over the weekend of February 13-14, the FARDC launched a new operation against the rebel militia in the DRC. American missionaries resident in Impfondo reported hearing shelling and gun fire across the river near the DRC town of Buburu. The FARDC have moved a gunboat into the region to patrol the river. The American missionaries reported seeing one boat speeding down the river and firing into the DRC on February 14 south of Impfondo.

16. (U) Some elements of the FARDC mission, however, appear to have come to a literal standstill following the weekend offensive. On February 15, a FARDC gunship ran aground just downstream from Impfondo, ROC. FARDC forces have been unable to get the boat off the sandbar and UNHCR Impfondo reports that a helicopter was dispatched to take the FARDC soldiers back to base. Reportedly, the boat has been abandoned in the hopes that it will free itself when the river level rises with the return of the rains sometime in July.

17. (U) Due to the continued instability in the region, the UN system has forbidden its employees from travelling south of Impfondo on the Oubangui. UNHCR reports that MSF has been operating south of Impfondo, but that their boats have come under fire earlier this week. UN shipments from Brazzaville have also been attacked. As a result, the ROC Army is now providing armed escort for all UN shipments and the Prefet has ordered a 17H curfew on all river traffic in an effort to cut down on attacks. WFP reports that they have a 250 ton barge stopped en route to Impfondo under orders from the ROC military that they cannot go any further. The WFP barge is still on the Congo River and has not reached the junction with the Oubangui. The barge has been stopped for the last five days and WFP does not know if the delay is due to the lack of an available military escort or the inability of the military escort to guarantee the barge's safety any further upriver.

41,432 AND COUNTING

18. (U) Since launching the formal registration campaign on January 15, UNHCR has registered 41,432 displaced persons in the Betou District of the Likouala Department. The registration process is ongoing and UNHCR hopes to have registered the entire population by the end of March. Initially, UNHCR feared that the GROC overestimated the displaced population. The 11% discrepancy between GROC reports and UNHCR registration figures previously reported (REF A), however, has held true. With nearly 40% of the refugees registered, UNHCR is confident that their total will not differ greatly from the GROC's last official count issued on February 4 of 115,077 displaced persons.

EASTHAM